



## *Duties toward Elders* in Ban Zhao (5-ca. 116 CE)

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In her poem *Needle and Thread*, Ban Zhao praises those who “with circumspection and subtlety, dare criticize in speech or writing, the faulty action of superiors.” Yet, in *Lessons for Women*, Ban Zhao in contrast, demands women’s obedience to parents-in-law even when she thinks they are wrong. Confronted with the conflict between “duty” and “love,” regarding in-laws with whom she must live, Ban Zhao offers a way forward. Until the family comes to agreement, what must mitigate is love or affection for the whole family. Ban Zhao reasons that in maneuvering relationships with the elders, the daughter-in-law is to “secure for herself the good will of younger brothers-and sisters-in law. This is achieved by acquiring closeness and “respect” for each other, gained by sincere affection and magnified love. In this way duty and love come together. When that occurs, the daughter-in-law will be recognized positively, her faults minimized, and she will be an example that will radiate beyond the family to the neighborhood, district, and to her own mother and father.

Being morally responsible for family well-being, her actions to earn praise or blame must be dutiful and loving. For a loving unity relies upon a daughter-in-law’s virtue, beauty, modesty, and respect or “excellence.” But if the daughter-in-law, rather than being modest and acquiescent and so esteemed, is instead arrogant and perverted in love, she will be blamed, and the family will be dishonored and disgraced. If the daughter-in-law is virtuous, the family will be virtuous and so esteemed. Such is Ban Zhao’s Confucian advice to her “daughters” about their duties toward their elders. The daughter-in-law must ever become moral and wise, duties being ever accomplished in relation to love. In Ban Zhao’s thinking, all is in relationship, children to elders, elders to children, duty to love.

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